open space

voices from The Women’s
Library occupation

Reclaim It

Tired of watching helpless while the government destroys people’s lives and creates a world we don’t want to live in? Then join us on International Women’s Day to take direct action to stop the cuts.

International Women’s Day 2013 was the occasion for a mysterious call to action, circulated via social media and word-of-mouth by an anonymous coalition. Attracted by the call-out’s promise that the action would involve both a ‘reclaiming’ of ‘feminist space’ and ‘reclaiming’ a more radical tradition of International Women’s Day, about fifty people gathered at the two specified London locations at twelve noon on Friday, 8 March 2013. They did not know where they would be going or what the action would entail but they allowed themselves to be led through the pouring rain by specially appointed ‘shepherds’, who followed a circuitous route designed to shake off the police attempting to follow them (Figure 1).

They eventually arrived at The Women’s Library in Whitechapel, welcomed by a live samba band, to find tents pitched and banners flying. Only minutes earlier The Women’s Library had been occupied by a small group of feminists from the ‘Reclaim It’ coalition. What followed was a two-day occupation of the historic building in London’s East End, an act of protest not only against the Library’s imminent closure but also in opposition to the austerity regime at large, highlighting how cuts exacerbate existing inequalities along lines of gender, race, class and disability (Figure 2).

Over 200 of us (of all ages and genders) joined the occupation over the next two days. We discussed together, planned together and lived together. Among us, there was a sense that something a bit different was happening. We were struck in particular by how unusual it was to participate in a ‘direct action’ that was women-led and explicitly feminist.

The Women’s Library occupation was a protest defined by joy as well as rage—with music, dancing, new friendships and a drawing of strength from the history of earlier feminist struggles documented in the Library’s world-renowned archive. For many of us, it was the first time we had been in a
political space where an ‘intersectional’ approach to feminist politics (the idea that any struggle for gender liberation needed to encompass resistance to other forms of ‘intersecting’ oppressions such as racism and class exploitation) was a consensus from which we started, rather than something we had to argue for (Figure 3).

The occupation was just a tiny part of wider (if fragmented and sporadic) resistance against the destructive impact of austerity on people’s daily lives. Despite the small scale of the action, a number of us from ‘Reclaim It’ felt it was important that the occupation was not lost to memory. For us, it had been a significant event in our political lives and we wanted to find out more about other people’s experiences of it, and what lessons and reflections might be gleaned (Figure 4).
We have therefore started to record ‘voices’ from The Women’s Library occupation, and what follows is based on some of the first of our interviews.3 We hope that these will form the foundation of an ongoing oral history project through which we will not only seek to add to a collective memory of resistance, but also reflect upon and critique our own participation in the occupation. Although this project is still in its very early stages (and we hope that on reading this other people involved in the occupation will get in touch and contribute), it has already raised many questions. How can radical histories be used as a political tool to inspire and inform future struggles? Is it possible for such histories to both celebrate and commemorate moments of resistance, providing sustenance for continued activism, without succumbing to romanticised myth-making? Does our lack of critical distance hinder our ability to tell the story of this occupation? Or can our personal investment in it,
and the intensity of emotions it continues to invoke, add something to the narrative?

Because some official accounts of the fate of The Women’s Library erased the fact that the ‘brilliant Save The Women’s Library team’ opposed the removal of its collections to the London School of Economics (LSE), and ignored the 8 March occupation altogether (Liddington, 2013: 275–277), we felt it necessary to get our side of the story down in writing. Yet this attempt to write a corrective to history made us realise that even anti-establishment impulses to ‘set the record straight’ risk creating similarly foreclosed and definitive narratives. We have not managed to resolve any of these tensions in this Open Space piece, and although we have aimed to include multiple and sometimes dissonant voices, all we can do is warn our readers that what follows is by no means an official account and awaits re-writing by others. Such a project will, we hope, be an appropriate contribution to The Women’s Library archive itself, and help to ensure that it remains not simply an academic resource, but a library that can play an active role in day-to-day struggles (Figure 5).

resisting austerity, from the general to the particular

The interesting thing is that it’s the university with the highest percentage of working-class and ethnic minority students in the country. The occupation took place on the day that The Women’s Library exhibition ‘The Long Road to Equality’ was due to end, pending the building’s permanent closure. London Metropolitan University, custodians of the world-renowned collection since

Figure 5  A (very wet) samba band welcomes the activists who had gathered at secret locations, finally arriving at the occupied Women’s Library
1977, had announced in March 2012 that it wanted to rid itself of The Women’s Library. This had provoked widespread outrage from feminists and academics: over 12,000 people signed a petition against its closure and a Save The Women’s Library Campaign was launched by readers, staff, feminists and local residents, demanding ‘Keep the Building, Keep the Staff and Keep the Library Open’ (Biggs, 2012; Campbell, 2012; Cooper, 2012; Flood, 2012).5

The link made by the occupiers between the closure of The Women’s Library and a broader regime of austerity was not simply symbolic but related very specifically to the situation at London Met. For some years this ex-polytechnic, post ’92 university had been viewed by many as the ‘canary-down-the-mine’ in a process of privatisation and neo-liberalisation within Higher Education. Degrees in Women’s Studies, Women’s History, Caribbean Studies and Trade Union Studies had been closed and large numbers of academic staff made redundant as part of the transformation of this formerly progressive, widening-participation university into what the local UNISON branch called ‘Easy-Met’ (Morgan, 2011; Shepherd, 2011).6

The closure of The Women’s Library was thus part of a wider process of so-called rationalisation. Behind the decision to divest custodianship was the assumption that working-class students, destined for low-paid service sector employment, had no need for the thriving research culture fostered by the Library. Such philistinism affected not just London Met students but also wider communities of activists and local residents. One of the justifications for closing The Women’s Library was that the majority of readers were not enrolled at London Met (unsurprisingly, given the abolition of most of its humanities degrees), but came from ‘outside’ the University. In fact, these outsiders comprised not just visiting academics but also people from the local area—schoolchildren, pensioners, women’s groups and adult education students—as well as activists keen to use one of the few public buildings devoted to the history and future of women’s struggles for liberation.

A sense of anger against the closure of a building that was a community as well as an academic resource was expressed by many of the occupiers and interviewees, many of them reflecting on their own experiences of using the Library. One occupier and local resident recalled how her mother, a retired secondary school teacher, had used the Library:

For me, one issue I was concerned about ... was our relationship to knowledge ... for many years she had spent a lot of time just casually spending hours in The Women’s Library, after she would phone me and say ‘I’ve just been hanging out in The Women’s Library’. She’s not an academic ... there were limitations to their outreach programme ... but I think there was a chance for people who were retired or whatever to hang out, and I think that’s a really important part of a public resource like a library.

The occupation thus sought to link the closure of this particular library to a more general picture of ‘knowledge enclosure’: cuts to Higher Education, the closure of


public libraries and the resulting limitation of working-class people’s cultural horizons. That feminist activists should be particularly concerned with such issues reflected the occupation’s desire to resist a single-issue analysis and to identify connections between the various aspects of austerity from an ‘intersectional’ feminist perspective (Figure 6).

The closure of The Women’s Library was a feminist issue not simply because of its identification with women, but also because it featured as part of a broader regime of austerity that was decidedly gendered in its impact. The disproportionately detrimental effects of the coalition government’s cuts on women have been widely documented. The abolition of universal child benefit and cuts to Sure Start children’s centres, sexual health and abortion services, violence against women services, and pregnancy and maternity grants will not only affect women as service users, but also as the people who end up taking on much of this work as unpaid labour in the home. Moreover, job cuts in the public sector (estimated to reach 710,000 by 2017) hit women the hardest because they make up 64 per cent of the public sector workforce. The Fawcett Society warn that ‘Taken individually, the elements that make up the current austerity package will make life more difficult for many women across the UK; added together they spell a tipping point for women’s equality’ (Fawcett Society, 2012) (Figure 7).

Many of us involved in the occupation had at times felt overwhelmed and politically paralysed by the vast and seemingly totalised nature of all these cuts. One possible reason why The Women’s Library occupation felt so important was because it
offered a tangible opportunity for resistance. Its closure was a concrete and visible manifestation of austerity, affecting a wide range of people. The occupation was compelled to take an ‘intersectional’ approach, bringing together feminist, anti-cuts, anti-gentrification and free-education activists. The Women’s Library occupation was therefore not just a symbolic redressing of austerity but a chance to experience a fleeting moment of resistance—taking back a public building as so many closed their doors, creating a space where all of these groups could come together in an act of both dissent and solidarity.

what does a feminist occupation look like?

It provided a tiny glimpse into possible ways of living differently. People ... kept commenting on how good the atmosphere was, how well people were treating each other, how it was possible to bring children. In meetings it felt like people were very genuinely trying to think about how we best organise the occupation and what our strategy should be, and were listening to each other.

Much of The Women’s Library collection is a history of women’s struggles, and the occupation explicitly drew on this history. ‘The Long March to Equality’ exhibition, complete with suffragette banners, photographs of the 1970 Miss World protests and a recreation of the Greenham Common anti-nuclear camp, provided the perfect
backdrop to an instance of twenty-first-century feminism. The irony of the exhibition being marked for closure on International Women’s Day was not lost on the occupiers, and over the next two days the archive itself suddenly came alive. The exhibition included a timeline marking various milestones in women’s fight for equality that stretched around the four walls of the gallery, and this was quickly extended so that the final date included the occupation itself.

The decision to have a ‘feminist’ occupation was informed by the experiences of many of the young female occupiers within a wider activist movement that often failed to take gender politics seriously. As one interviewee, a history lecturer and trade unionist who had frequently used The Women’s Library for both research and activism, recalled, ‘From the beginning we had quite an explicit understanding that we wanted this to be a feminist occupation, and partly what that meant was a response to cases of sexual violence within what were [otherwise] incredibly exciting new political spaces that were emerging’. Starting with the student protests in 2010 and gaining strength with the Occupy movement of 2011–2012, the occupation of public and institutional space had become a key feature of anti-austerity movements. Yet the act of eating, living and sleeping together posed the thorny question of how these anti-authoritarian spaces could also be ‘safe’. In the worst instances, extreme acts of sexual violence occurred, while in others low-level sexual harassment permeated what was often a ‘macho’ and certainly a male-dominated environment. ‘I did sleep there, but it felt very unsafe’, recalled one interviewee of a previous occupation she had joined when studying for an MA in musicology at a London university.

The Women’s Library occupation sought to confront such issues directly. A working group was established, responsible for thinking through the occupation’s ‘safer spaces’ policy, and it was collectively agreed that separate sleeping spaces should be available for ‘self-defining’ women (a configuration that explicitly included trans and gender queer women). But the issue of ‘safety’ was defined not merely as logistical but as an overtly political question, requiring that attention be paid to the multifaceted power relations that structure even movements that strive to be anti-hierarchical. Having secured the building and opened its doors to a whole new crowd of occupiers, the organising group agreed to disband in the belief that all future decisions about the occupation should be made by as many people as possible. Questions such as how long to stay in the building, how to deal with the police and what degree of physical resistance the occupation should entail were therefore discussed at length in forums of up to 150 people, and decisions were reached by consensus.

Such practices were familiar to many of the occupiers through previous involvement in Climate Camp or the Occupy movement. Yet we felt that our feminist politics brought something distinctive, pushing us to attend to less visible manifestations of power hierarchies—particularly those which shape the more ‘social’ and/or

Definitions of what constitutes ‘safety’, and even whether the term is useful to describe a general impulse to challenge violence, silencing and marginalisation within Left spaces, are a topic for debate within contemporary feminism by no means resolved at this occupation. Moreover, the need for (some) women to feel ‘safe’ can at times obscure other hierarchies, such as those that exclude people of colour and/or...
'affective' aspects of an occupation. Organisers, for example, tried to open up the space beyond cliques of experienced activists and their accompanying friendship networks. We leafleted the neighbourhood and invited in curious passersby to view the exhibition. Our sense of the demographic attracted by the occupation was that it largely reflected The Women's Library's regular users—a lot of students and education workers, many of them also local residents—predominantly, but certainly not entirely, white. In this sense it failed to reflect the diversity of the local area, yet just as The Women's Library (for all its limitations) attracted a much wider range of people than most research libraries, the occupation brought in a broader spectrum of people than many Left spaces.

We worked particularly hard to ensure that the occupation was child-friendly and many people did bring their children throughout the weekend. New arrivals were welcomed at the door, and were given an update on the situation and a quick introduction to the ground rules—all with the intention of making them feel able to take ownership of the space. Everyone was invited to join a working group responsible for a particular area such as food or security. One interviewee remarked upon the contrast between her experience of a student occupation where 'No one really spoke to you, no one welcomed you … I found it hard to find out about anything' and the friendly atmosphere at The Women's Library.

The mass meeting held on Friday evening was marked by a particularly impassioned plea that the reproductive labour necessary to sustain the occupation ('skipping' for the evening meal, cleaning the toilets, etc.) be given equal value to more high-profile tasks such as press-liaison or legal support. For one interviewee, it was remarkable to see men collecting dirty cups and doing the washing up rather than (as was so often the case on the activist scene) this work being ignored in the central planning and then left to women to silently carry out. Because the occupation was in protest against the closure of a beautiful building, designed by feminist architect Claire Wright, it was fitting that such care was given to looking after the physical surroundings. One occupier was subsequently told that the receptionist, who had worked at The Women's Library for many years, declared on her return to work following the occupation that the Library was neater and cleaner than she had left it.

Occupiers attempted to combine such feminist practices with broader theoretical and political discussions in a programme of events and workshops. One of the motives for undertaking the occupation was to use it as a chance to open up a 'space of exception', in which a different kind of world might be imagined and strategised. Workshops were planned, for example, on sex and relationships education, underground theatre, and precarity and gender at work. The first day of the occupation ended on a high with a performance from the musical ensemble 'Moby Clit and the She Shanties' (Figure 8). Their bawdy feminist lyrics, DIY instruments and tolerance of overly enthusiastic audience participation perfectly
matched the mood of the occupation where creative expression was seen as inherent to, rather than apart from, political practice. One interviewee, an art student at the time, stated, ‘I think I used some of my experiences in my academic work as well—I did my BA dissertation on radical art, the intersections of radical art and protest, and there was a chapter on ... the politics of feminist activism. I used some of my experiences in politics to feed into my academic work and vice versa’.

In the end, the majority of the programme never went ahead. Bailiffs and police began to mass outside the Library on the second day, following the serving of eviction papers at 3 am the night before. A group of occupiers and members of the Green and Black Cross legal support team appeared in court on the Saturday morning to try to appeal, but their claim was rejected. The police presence outside the building began to increase over the course of the day, and a large workshop held in the Library’s auditorium was abruptly cut short when the security working group burst in to report that the bailiffs were preparing to force entry.

**foundations for future struggles?**

*It really helped to get to know people in other groups personally ... to create a basis for working together, in a political scene that is very often pretty fragmented.*

There was, throughout the occupation, a tension between the practicalities necessitated by up to 200 people illegally occupying a building and ensuring that the occupied space was used to enable wider political discussions. One interviewee, a squatters’ rights activist and legal expert, recalled how frustrated she had felt when, instead of attending to the urgency of imminent eviction on the Saturday afternoon, about fifty occupiers had continued with their workshop on some unrelated ‘theoretical issue’. Conversely, other occupiers felt that it was important
not to let London Met management and the police set the agenda and distract from this rare opportunity to discuss feminist politics with such a large and diverse set of people.

This tension reflected more fundamental disagreements over the ultimate purpose of the occupation. Was a long-term occupation, during which we would take over The Women’s Library and run it as a community resource, ever a realistic prospect? And if not, did that make the occupation nothing more than a press stunt with no sustainable outcome? Such difficult questions were never resolved, and continued to provoke a heated discussion in one of the group interviews carried out almost a year later. One interviewee reported that her friend, who had played a key role in planning the occupation, had not wanted to participate in the oral history project because she felt it dishonestly valorised an action that she saw as ending in defeat.

These differences are perhaps not surprising given the relative diversity of Left political perspectives represented at the occupation, with some strongly identifying as either anarcha-fems or Marxist-feminists, while others wanted only to come together under the umbrella of ‘anti-cuts’. Yet such variation was also seen as a strength. Groups involved in planning the occupation included Disabled People Against the Cuts, Fem Cells, The Feminist Library, Feminist Fightback, Occupy, Solidarity Federation and UK Uncut. Interviewees felt that this diversity and the coalition-building process it necessitated was an important part of the action. An occupier from Feminist Fightback recalled how working together during the occupation formed the basis for subsequent shared ventures: ‘The links we built in the planning and during the occupation, and I think the trust that was necessary for that, has led to us doing other joint actions since then. In Feminist Fightback a couple of us went and helped with the UK Uncut action [against welfare cuts] … and we have also done some pickets of shops who take staff on the workfare programme, with SolFed’.

As well as alliances between political groupings, the issue of friendship also came up a lot during the interviews. One occupier, a migrant from Russia, said that she had got to know more people in the area of South East London where she lives and studies as a result of the occupation: ‘we both live in the same place but we’d never met. It turned out some of the people actually live in my road, and [now] we’re really good friends. It’s really helped me … I connected with people through going like “oh, you live here, you go there” and it’s been really useful’.

Perhaps it is only through anecdotal connections such as this that we can begin to understand the legacy of The Women’s Library occupation. By any other measure it was a failure. Once the occupiers had been evicted, the closure of The Women’s Library went ahead and its collections were removed to the LSE. Today, anyone wishing to use the collection has to reserve a seat at least two days in
advance and all reading materials must be pre-ordered—factors seen as severely limiting the accessibility of the Library despite it remaining officially open to the public. Moreover, The Women's Library's once-famous open-access collection, comprising thousands of books, journals and feminist newsletters that used to line the walls of the Reading Room in Whitechapel, is now locked away in the LSE vaults.

Yet the networks established by the Save the Women's Library Campaign and the subsequent occupation remain, and have already been used to put pressure on the LSE to improve accessibility (Schwartz, 2014). Moreover, the memory of the occupation, the joy and sense of solidarity it fleetingly embodied, has continued to nourish and sustain many of us though subsequent campaigns and the often mundane grind of workplace and community organising. There is a long feminist tradition of 'pre-figurative politics' that seeks to put the new world it strives for into practice in the here-and-now, to make 'doing' politics an inspiration rather than a chore. At its best, The Women's Library occupation managed to achieve this. To take over a building housing a famous archive of high monetary value was an audacious act. It was only made possible by the hard campaign work carried out over the preceding year, ensuring that the Reclaim It group felt confident not only of the importance of the occupation, but also that the time had come for a much more confrontational and direct action. Joining hands and taking this risk together led to an unexpected feeling of strength and joy in the face of repression, which was summed up in the occupation's final moments when, as one interviewee laughingly recalled, 'And while we were waiting for the eviction ... someone put on the sound system and we started dancing'.

Were you at The Women's Library occupation? If you would like to participate in further oral history interviews or send us your written memories, please contact feminist.fightback@gmail.com

To read more about the occupation and view more photographs, please visit: www.reclaimit2013.wordpress.com

references


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